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# Italian Roots, American Ways: Cultural Issues in Twentieth-Century Italian American Communities

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## 1. Introduction

The twentieth century is a century well known for its industrial and socio-cultural advancement, but also a century of downward mobility and social decay if one considers the atrocities of the two world wars. From the tumultuous years of the late nineteenth century and well into the 1920s, people from all over the world have begun to realize that the world is a global village and that their primordial search for food and job needs not to be satisfied only within the boundaries of their motherland. Therefore many citizens of the poor and underdeveloped countries decided to go on a quest to foreign countries, searching for some sort of economical safety and better social status. Usually the emigrants came from poorer and politically unstable European countries like the decaying Russian empire and, later, the rising communist Russia, the newly united Italy and the multiethnic Yugoslavia. They migrated to the New World countries like the USA, Australia and some South-American countries like Chile and Argentina, which seemed to offer better life conditions. This fact of relocation in order to find something better for themselves and their family is quite well explained by some critics who are to be discussed in this essay.

Other than the noted problems of economic nature, there are some other issues to be considered when talking about leaving the homeland and setting out on a journey which is not merely a travel across the ocean, but a whole process of social and cultural assimilation and acculturation. To put it simply, migrations made people change and adapt to the new ways of life proposed by the countries they moved to, very often forcing them to abandon the social and cultural characteristics which characterized them as citizens of Ireland, Italy, Croatia or some other countries.

Furthermore, a special focus shall be put on the arrival of Italian people to the United States from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These immigrants, although there were

manymore who arrived alongside them, seem to be rather specific given that today they still exist despite their acculturation. I would argue that Italian immigrants are quite special because, in a way, they underwent the process of acculturation and adaptation to the American lifestyle, but they still managed to resist the complete assimilation, another process that many other immigrants were exposed to. However, today the effort the immigrants have put into their acculturation is actually recognized, without having lost the basic features that have shaped their personalities. The effort is seen on many examples from various literary works gathered under the name of Italian-American studies. Contemporary scholars studying Italian-Americanism like Donna Gabaccia, Thomas Ferraro, Joseph Sciorra and Laura Ruberto depict the immigrant lifestyle and the status of their assimilation based on their ability to interact and connect with other (ethnic) groups.

Many ethnic groups arrived to the States in the mentioned period, among which were people from the East and South – East of Europe. The areas they came from were politically unstable and on the brink of war. The only solution to poverty and despair in their homelands was to abandon it in search of something better. Taking into account the geographical vicinity of the tumultuous European countries, the potential migrants could affect each other's opinion and seek solution in a getaway. Given that the Italian people were even historically in close contact with the Croatian people, especially along the Adriatic coast, it is not so strange that both set off in search of a better life, and later, having arrived to the United States, the old acquaintances stuck together or at least close to one another. According to Jelena Lončar, both Italians and Croats emigrated from Europe first in small groups during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and later in large numbers up until the 1970s. There were some pauses during the World Wars, but all in all Italians and Croats emigrated at the same time. Both ethnic groups were of the same social background, coming from Mediterranean rural fishing or farming communities.

The analysis of the processes of migration, acculturation and assimilation is to be done on the following novels: Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete*, Mario Puzo's *Godfather* and Francine Prose's *Household Saints*. The mentioned novels discuss many similar issues, regardless of the fact that their time frameworks are not the same and that the authors come from different backgrounds. It is necessary to consider the novels in detail and single out the most important features each of them carries. There are many similarities and differences which shall be explained and supported by examples. In the process of analysis some thought shall be given to Croatian-American authors, more specifically to Edward Ifkovic and his novel *Anna Marinkovich*. The novel is set in America between two world wars and it discusses the issues of assimilation and acculturation on the example of a Croatian family in a multiethnic, mainly European community in the USA.

Given that even today migrations are a huge concern because of the political and financial turmoil they cause among the receiving countries, it is needless to say that even back in the 1900s, when industry was experiencing huge growth, the migration waves made enormous impact on both the native people and the migrants.

To sum up, this essay discusses the issues of Italian immigrants to the United States, the generation gap between the first and later generations of Italian Americans and the socio-cultural processes they undergo upon their arrival to the promised land.

## **2. Immigration to the USA from the Southern and South-Eastern European Periphery – an Overview**

As pointed out in the introduction, migrations started well before industrialization and capitalism but gained preeminence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this paragraph I shall discuss the history of immigration with special regard to the immigration to North America. Furthermore, the terms as assimilation and acculturation shall be explained on examples of Italian and Croatian immigrants. Important critics like Robert Park and William Boelhower shall be discussed and their key terms shall be explained and exemplified.

The mass immigration to the New World, especially to the United States, commenced as the country began its growth and development into a capitalist force to rule the world. There were many immigration waves coming to the United States, while in the last quarter of the nineteenth century migrants increasingly came from poor Southern and Eastern European countries. According to the data Adam McKeown proposes in Table I of his article “Global Migration, 1846-1940” in the period of almost a hundred years the estimated number of migrants to Americas is from 55 to 58 million (156). The majority of people moved to North America, i.e. to the United States, while the rest transferred to Argentina, Brazil and Cuba. During these years, there were so many people migrating to the USA that some kind of anti-immigration law had to be established. These were the so-called immigration acts, restricting certain immigrant social groups from entering the country or, before entering it, taking some kind of tests or paying head tax. Adam McKeown states that “transatlantic migration was hit hardest by World War I, but recovered to 1.2 million migrants in 1924, after which immigration quotas in the United States severely curtailed immigration from southern and eastern Europe.” (167). Immigration to the USA reached its peak in a pre-war era from 1910-1914, but it was greatly affected by the World War I and anti-immigration restrictions, which caused immigration from Eastern Europe to subside.

Even though the immigrants had all the good reasons for abandoning their motherland due to various shortages of food or lack of sustainable livelihood, they still managed to find or earn enough money for them to be able to travel across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World. The pattern of transatlantic emigration was mostly as following: The head of the family headed out on his own in search of better life and housing, but upon coming to America he had to face the reality of the capitalist world, a new economic and social order that he was not accustomed to. Struggling hard to earn for a decent living, the father figure was eventually able to send his family a certain amount of money so they would be able to join him in the new country. There was also another pattern where a young married couple, with or without children, moved to the USA to bring up their children there. The examples of such migration patterns are quite clearly depicted in the novels which are to be mentioned in the essay. The obvious examples of such transfers are to be found in the Croatian-American novel *Anna Marinkovich* (1980) by Edward Ifkovic and *The Jungle* (1906) by Upton Sinclair, both depicting the emigrants from my designated area of interest in this essay. In both cases, the young male heads of the family take the obligation of performing physically demanding jobs to take care of their family. Here we are focused on the changes that the first generation of immigrants had to deal with.

However, as Robert E. Park states, not only did the immigrants have to undergo the difficult processes of linguistic and environmental adaptations, but their entire mental image had to be changed. They underwent acculturation and gradual assimilation just to be able to blend into the existing society in a less harmless way. The changes the first generation had to endure were made in order to ease for them the tough transfer from one surroundings to the other, while the second generation entered into more expansive contact with other ethnic groups. The reasons why the second generation got assimilated was the mingling and intermarrying with other groups, especially the native citizens. This led to changes in habits,

customs, physique and temperament. There were always some examples of intermarrying and racial hybridism even between the most isolated races (Park 883). Furthermore, Park suggests that the arrival of the alien people imposes a threat to the natives and a sort of revolution is imminent. Immigration, i.e. the arrival of another, foreign culture and its mingling with the native cultures represent a change which can be either good or bad. To put it in other words, the change can make the people respond in either positive or negative way, and it most certainly changes the general image of the people in a certain area and its culture:.

The first and most obvious difference between revolution and migration is that in migration the breakdown of social order is initiated by the impact of an invading population, and completed by the contact and fusion of native with alien peoples. In the case of the former, revolutionary ferment and the forces which have disrupted society have ordinarily had, or seem to have had, their sources and origins mainly if not wholly within, rather than without, the society affected. It is doubtful whether it can be successfully maintained that every revolution, every Aufklärung, every intellectual awakening and renaissance has been and will be provoked by some invading population movement or by the intrusion of some alien cultural agency. (Park 885)

As Park states, in both cases there occurs a breach of social order. However, in case of migration, the social order is contaminated by the arriving people, while in case of revolution, social order is changed from within the society; that is, the order proves to be faulty and the society is to change it by mounting revolutions.

To exemplify the opposition between revolution and migration, I would like to point out the question of Italian immigrants. They came to the United States, i.e. they migrated due to the social and cultural revolutions and changes (negative rather than positive ones) happening in Italy. They came and underwent the processes of acculturation and assimilation,



blending with the peoples already living in the States and therefore changing and contributing to the genetic picture of the already hybrid American people. However, upon arriving and settling in the United States, the newly settled people of America had to face the discrepancies between the traditional Old World and the modern New World. To put it simply, the Italians Americans of several generations, separated into clans, forming alliances and treaties to fulfill their interests according to their beliefs and their willingness to get assimilated or acculturated. The best example to sustain this is *The Godfather* as a whole. There the poor Sicilian immigrant Vito Corleone fulfills the American dream and establishes an empire on the American soil, an empire based on doing and returning favors. He oversees every single move his underlings are about to do. Due to his great power, he made a lot of enemies through the years. These are the people who originated from the same place as Corleone, but as the years went by, their paths separated and they lost Corleone's trust by working against him and not doing him favors as he had obviously been accustomed to. So, although Park states that revolutions and migrations are not the same, still they cannot survive one without the other, or to put it differently, there seems to be a simple series of interrelated causes and effects. Immigration of Italians to the US caused a ferment among the peoples already living in the States. As the years went by, the restlessness settled down and second and third generations arose who were assimilated into the existing society simply by being born on the American soil and being raised in American society. In the circle of their families they still retained traditional beliefs and social statuses. As generations were born and raised and intermingled with the Americans, some individuals went their separate ways, which caused another set of problems, this time within families.

The connection between migration and revolution being clarified, it would be helpful to show what the American people from the beginning of the 20th century thought of the fact that their country was being flooded with what they perceived as cheap, ignorant, and alien

laborers. The essay by Walter G. Beach discusses the impacts the arrival of new people has had, distinguishing between the old and new immigration. Considering the fact that the text is written in 1925, it vividly represents the contemporary public opinion. There existed different patterns of assimilation, offering the old immigration as an exemplary model, and the new immigration as a bad model of immigration. However, this is how the Americans of the 1920s, at the time emigration came to a halt, saw the two groups of immigrants:

And this is a significant difference between the new immigration and the old: formerly the lure of the land brought men together into communities; in time the newcomers became a part of these communities, sharing in their institutions their standards and their life. But the response to wages which characterizes the new immigration throws men into temporary and artificial associations, without institutions or standards of social life. Thus the older basis of immigration tended on the whole to select from the top; it drew the strong and the far-seeing and the socially-minded. But the new industrial basis which brings immigrants today selects from the bottom, choosing the ignorant, the unresisting, the easily dominated, the cheap.

(Beach 374)

Accordingly, the old immigration consisted of people (Irish, German) who were joined into communities that shaped their lifestyle and facilitated their assimilation. They were beneficial for American society because they were hard-working people who built foundations for the American industrial growth. By the time the new immigrants came to America, the old ones were already assimilated. The new immigration (southern and eastern European peoples from Italy, Croatia, Poland, etc.) was so-called industrial immigration, coming to the States to work in industry. The old immigrants were considered family- and land-oriented, while the new immigrants had some other reasons and pursued different ways of accommodating themselves to the receiving society. They joined into unions and associations which helped them get around in the States, gathering all of them under one safety roof which secured them housing

and job. *The Jungle* and *Anna Marinkovich* present vivid examples of this new generation of immigrants, arriving to the States solely for the purpose of escaping from the old life, i.e. finding a job and starting a family there (coming to the US all alone and getting married there instead of arriving already with a spouse and children). The example of forming alliances and joining the unions is quite obvious in *The Jungle*. The title itself refers to the new, capitalistic American society which seems like a jungle to the newcomers unaccustomed to big cities, tall factories and similar modern constructions. In this jungle the newcomers are obliged to take care of themselves, to earn some money so they take jobs that are hard and poorly paid. In *The Jungle* the protagonist Jurgis takes up a job in the local meat factory, struggling to provide a better life for his family, but not quite succeeding in it. Later he joins the workers' union, as a member of which he manages to survive in the cruel capitalistic world of America.

All of the novels interpreted and analyzed in this essay belong to a specific genre of immigrant novel, as described by William Q. Boelhower in his essay "The Immigrant Novel as Genre." There Boelhower states that, to interpret a newly formed corpus of texts, one must go beyond the strictly descriptive level and study the englobing structures, the historical reality that accounts for the genesis of a genre ("The Immigrant Novel" 3). What he wants to say is that to fully analyze the new texts written by immigrant Americans, one needs to relate the texts to the periods described in it, i.e. to connect them to the historical circumstances and historical situation in general. The time when the novel was written is not so important, but rather the time the novel is set in. For example, *Household Saints* is written in 1981, but it deals with the period after the World War II to the 1980s. *The Godfather*, published in year 1969, deals with the period from the 1940s to 1950s, with many references to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, describing the arrival of Vito Corleone to New York. *Christ in Concrete* was written in 1939 and it deals with the period from 1923 onwards. Furthermore, what Boelhower does is

to uncover the story behind the story, i.e. he defines a single, background story pattern which is the same for all the novels classified as immigrant novels.

At the thematic level, the specific topic of immigration defines the text's macroproposition, which in turn underlies the text's macrostructure. This topic is paradigmatic in that it explains the presence of a series of deep elements common to all the works pertaining to this genre.

Thus, the topic is a principle of inclusion and exclusion and provides a closed fictional reality.

(“The Immigrant Novel” 4)

An immigrant protagonist, representing the ethnic world view, comes to America with great expectations, and through a series of trials is led to reconsider them in terms of his final status (“Immigrant Novel” 5). In this case, an Italian comes to the USA, as the evocation of the promised land where everything is better. This immigrant is on his own out there, but not lacking in expectations. However, he needs to go through a series of hard, poorly paid jobs in order to advance and fulfill the American dream he came to realize in the first place. Hard work and problems with inadequate housing make the immigrant gradually lose enthusiasm and become aware of the often cruel reality. By the end of the novel, the immigrant is forced to either become assimilated in order to accept the new lifestyle and culture, or is erased by the phenomenon of Americanism and its features, which suffocate him/her.

The mentioned features of expectation and reality, the imagined and the real world, form a theoretical basis for the immigrant novel and they define it as such. As Boelhower argues in his “The Brave New World of Immigrant Autobiography,” the protagonist is to be Americanized upon his arrival to the States in order to fulfill the American dream. The life of protagonist is constructed out of two worlds, the old one representing homeland and tradition, and the other representing capitalism and Americanism:

If immigrant autobiography offers a "system of expectations" and "possible worlds" through its use of the language of myth, it does so to form a new message or to give a new reading to the old one. This is evident in the transformation (or Americanization) of the protagonist, during which process he, from a metacultural perspective, is forced to confront the utopian grammar of the New World for what it actually represents. In other words, immigrant autobiography must organize two cultural systems, a culture of the present and the future and a culture of memory, into a single model. ("The Brave New World" 6-7)

To summarize his idea of immigrant autobiography, Boelhower offers opposites of two different cultural systems, a culture of the present and the future and a culture of memory that stand in juxtaposition. The two systems combined together form the basis for immigrant autobiography because both are important in immigrants' life. The culture of memory represents the traditional Old World, the world an immigrant comes from. In immigrant novels and autobiographies such culture is not depicted as being present, i.e. characters do not live in it, whereas the culture of the present and the future is the New World culture.

Examples of such theory are to be found in each of the novels discussed here. In *The Godfather* and *Christ in Concrete*, the examples are much clearer than in *Household Saints*. While in *The Godfather* and *Christ in Concrete* the culture of memory is the Italian traditional culture of southern Italy, in *Household Saints* one cannot clearly see the examples of culture of memory because the characters of the novel are second and third generation immigrants and their memory of the Italian homeland does not exist as such. They have not even been to Italy. Their only memory is of the present and future, that is of America, America here being their past, present and future, their homeland.

Furthermore, Boelhower proposes the idea of the Old and the New World based on the systems of expectations and possible worlds versus the Old World. The idea to confront the Old and the New World is explained in a following manner: Old World Reality is confronted

to New World Ideal, New World Ideal to New World Reality and New World Reality to Old World Reality. This system of opposites only deepens Boelhower's explanation of systems of possible worlds, giving a more profound insight into what immigrants imagined upon their arrival to the United States. Old World Reality is depicted as a harsh, poor living with barely something to eat, usually in the villages. Those who have gone to the United States before, send home the news about a glorious new country with tall, shiny buildings, wealth and plenty of everything, i.e. the New World Ideal. Those poor farm families decide to take on a journey themselves and, upon arrival, they are confronted with the New World Reality. The streets and cities are as grand and majestic as described, however they as immigrants do not get to live that kind of lives. They have to begin from the bottom, working hard in construction, factories, etc. In the concrete jungle they are thrown in, they work hard as they have already worked in their homeland.

Upton Sinclair's novel's title, *The Jungle*, describes the surroundings in which the immigrants are literally thrown in, i.e. the concrete jungle not so different from the poverty they have experienced in the old country. This is where Boelhower's third idea occurs. The realization of conditions found in the United States is the moment when immigrants are confronted with the opposition between the New World Reality and Old World Reality. Then they see that the new capitalistic world also has its disadvantages, but now they are bound to overcome them and create foundations for their children to be able to have better lives. The eye openers of the New World Reality were seen at every step the immigrants had to make to integrate themselves into the American society. In *Anna Marinkovich* these motifs of realization are seen through assimilation the Marinkovichs were exposed to. For example, the second generation of Marinkovichs, especially the older children, denied their Croatian origin and absorbed the American lifestyle to accept more easily the reality they have found themselves in, but also to be accepted by the US society.

In the case of *The Godfather*, or even better - in the case of Mario Puzo, the author of *The Godfather*, the reality the Italians were running away from was not quite known to them. The European immigrants from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s were running away primarily from poverty, being unaware of the political situation in their country. Peasants that they were, they did not bother themselves with politics and international affairs. Their only concern was how to put food on the table. Emigrating, they have found themselves in a new environment, but they still managed to organize themselves in ethnic groups. These groups often had good contacts with the homeland, organized gatherings, concerts and expressed their national identity through literature. Viscusi suggests that:

Italian immigrant ambitions have always had to negotiate the terms of national disparity between the place they left, whether they saw it as a nation or not, and the place where they arrived ( . *Italy's Many Diasporas*, Seattle, U of Washington P.1999 ). When that place was the United States, they soon realized that they were confronted with a powerful and hungry national/imperial agenda that was able to use literary forms, even lyric poetry, as engines to propel its progress. Often, in such circumstances, they found themselves, as D'Angelo did, far more closely in touch with the culture of Italian nationalism than they ever would have been had they remained in Italy. (50)

To explain, Viscusi states that Italians in Italy had no national feelings, being usually poor and illiterate. Coming to the United States, they were exposed to a high level of nationalism and imperialism propagated by the American apparatus. The American nationalism made them think about their homeland and the political situations there. With the contacts their ethnic organizations had with the Old World, the immigrants were able to raise their awareness of the political situation in their country and to foster the feeling of nationalism they were first lacking. From this situation the authors such as Mario Puzo and Pietro Di Donato arose, a second generation of Italian American authors who often drew bits from their lives and

incorporated them into their novels and stories. On the other hand, Francine Prose is an American author writing about the Italian minority. I consider these three authors important in explaining the Italian immigration to America and its consequences regarding the mentality of second and third generations.

In conclusion, along with immigration to the New World, many socio-cultural processes began. Acculturation and assimilation are the main processes each immigrant had to undergo. Not only were the immigrants influenced by these, but also the native people who were not always getting along with the immigrants. It is important to mention the difference in accepting acculturation and assimilation regarding the first and all the following generations. To avoid being completely assimilated, immigrants joined unions and other associations where their tradition was to be kept alive. Their cultural awareness caused some important immigrant autobiographical novels to emerge, which William Boelhower categorized and defined as a specific immigrant genre. On the examples from the three analyzed novels, the questions regarding the Old World and the New World shall be discussed in the following chapters.



### 3. Pietro Di Donato, *Christ in Concrete* – The Harsh New World Reality

In this chapter I shall discuss the problems of poverty upon arriving to the New World, with special emphasis on the influence religion and socialism have on the first and second generation of Italian Americans. The immigrants sought comfort in religion and tradition, as well as a solution for Americanization, i.e. the acceptance of standard WASP beliefs and customs. Religion and tradition were the only things still linking them to the Old World. A good example of a struggle against Americanization is analyzed in the novel *Christ in Concrete* by Pietro Di Donato, where the protagonist, although trying to keep the traditional beliefs of his family, joins the union and embraces socialism as his alternative religion, once he realizes that God was not always there for him.

As already stated, the works of Pietro Di Donato help those who study Italian Americanism because they come from the feather of the genuine Italian American fold, i.e. the second generation Italian immigrant from Abruzzo, Italy. As explained in the *Preface* written by Studs Terkel, his family came from Italy and in 1923 his father, the bricklayer Geremio, died in an accident on a construction site. Pietro continued his work in construction, but he also went to school and became a writer. In 1937 his short, largely autobiographical story *Christ in Concrete* was published in *Esquire* magazine, but later was expanded into a novel. Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* is one of the exemplary autobiographical immigrant novels given that he translated his life story into fiction, vividly describing the hard times his family and himself had to endure, but also expressing his thoughts in a stream of consciousness, the fact attested to in his novel by the use of specific realistic motifs of hard work, suffering and death.

In addition, New York - the cradle of all immigrant groups in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and up until today- still manages to gather its ethnic groups into quite vivacious

neighborhoods like, for example, Little Italy for Italian immigrants and their descendants. Even today, the ethnic groups that arrived in America in the late 1890s and early 1900s, still live and function closely, in the same way they functioned a hundred years ago. And this is not applicable only to big cities. The examples of it are to be found in *Anna Marinkovich*, where the Marinkovichs from Croatia were neighbors with an Italian family, the Pellegrinis. So, they had very different ethnic descent, but because of their old countries' geographical vicinity and similar socio-cultural issues, the two ethnic groups stuck together even in the New World. In *Christ in Concrete* the so called Tenement gathered families from different parts of Europe. There were the Olsens, the Donovans and the Molovitchs. To Paul and his huge Italian family it did not matter with whom they shared the building. After presenting his neighbors to the readers, Paul concludes that, just like him, they are all children of Christ (Di Donato 100). Once more, the importance of religion is quite evident in the lives of poor immigrants.

Harsh reality the Italian immigrants had to endure is one of the main motifs in the novel, along with the motif of religion as traditional, Old World heritage, and the motif of hard work. The New World Reality the Italians faced upon arriving to the States was overwhelming and they had to be assimilated into the society as soon as possible unless they wanted to literally starve to death. The natural course would be to find employment and a house to stay in. As far as the housing was concerned, they had little options but cheap and poor accommodations. Employment was not an issue because America at that time needed cheap laborers in construction and in ever-growing industrial sectors, and therefore the immigrants were the cheap working force. They were hard-working, quick to learn and did not hesitate to work in the lowest positions available- everything to bring in the money and pay for the housing and food. These physically demanding jobs in industry were destined for men, while women remained at home, taking care of numerous children and the household. In *Christ in Concrete*,

the masculine part of the family, Geremio and later Paul, were the ones bringing the money home, whilst Annunziata stayed at home and took care of children. The realistic depiction of the strain of a bricklayer's work helps the readers get an insight into the cruelty of the New World reality, instead of the so much expected easy success. On the first day of Paul's job, he physically could not endure the hard work that has fallen on his back.

He worked for hours alone on his knees reaching down between the beams. Each time he bent there was a lightning-like splitting of his back right where it joined his hips. His trowel wrist began to feel helpless, the fine sharp brickdust bruised his fingers, and the hot lime mortar ate into his hands.[...] Oh God how it hurts – but I must not let them see I have hurt myself already – I must lay brick! (Di Donato 76)

The cruelty of the work the Italians had to perform is even more intensified by the vivid descriptions of the pain the workers, in this case Paul, had to endure. For Paul it was even more painful because he was a newbie in bricklaying and his body was unaccustomed to this difficult occupation. As time passed by, Paul's body went numb and although he felt terrible pain, he continued working as if the pain was happening to someone else, since he didn't have the choice if he wanted to provide for his family and to bring bread to the family table. His childhood was forcibly taken away from him. Paul was not able to spend days playing with his friends. He had to get up early every day and go to the construction site. He worked hard and returned home late. As Avery states, Paul became the reformer, the one who carries the change for his family and for those like him. Not only had Paul had to leave school and become a bricklayer, but had also become the source of strength and wisdom for seven younger siblings and for his mother Annunziata. True to his New Testament name, Paul converted and became the leader of a new order. But where the Disciple Paul affirmed Jesus, Donato's hero rejected Christianity and embraced Socialism (Avery 28).

The years he passed working as a bricklayer transformed him into a tough, powerful man as his father was. His family, the traditional European peasant family which was based on the principles of religion, i.e. Christianity, had to embrace the change in their lives and step by step, they embraced socialist beliefs. This is what happened to many immigrant families. First generations remained faithful to Christianity and tried to pass the knowledge and faith to their children. However, the second generation, being influenced a great deal by Americanism while going to school and mingling with the American children, gradually or fully abandoned religion and therefore got assimilated into American society. It seemed that one had to leave religion aside to become integrated into the society.

The examples of it are evident in Ifkovic's *Anna Marinkovich* and Prose's *Household Saints*, while *The Godfather* depicts a rather different approach to religion and tradition. In *Anna Marinkovich* the parents are the carriers of tradition and religion, while their oldest children choose another path, a path of denial. They deny tradition, the Old World and everything it represents. Their wish for acceptance and integration drags them into assimilation. The process of assimilation is not quite clearly described in *Christ in Concrete*. I would argue that the religious motifs in *Christ in Concrete* are so powerful because the book itself was written in the first half of the twentieth century when the first generation had only established itself on the American soil. The second generation began to abandon tradition a bit later, after World War II and in the first few decades of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chronologically speaking, *Christ in Concrete* is set in the 1920s and 1930s, *The Godfather* is set in the period from the 1940s to 1970s, and *Household Saints* from the 1950s to 1980s. Di Donato's first generation (Geremio, Annunziata) in part overlaps with Puzo's first generation (Vito Corleone) and they seem to be the focus of the novel, while Prose's novel puts the second and the third generation in focus and it almost ridicules the first generation and its traditional beliefs as being obsolete and old-fashioned. Concentrating a bit deeper on religion

in *Christ in Concrete*, the evidence of importance of religion is rather obvious, starting from the title itself. The title *Christ in Concrete* refers to Paul's paternal figure, his father Geremio, who died in an accident on a construction site, falling into liquid concrete and being buried alive. Di Donato uses naturalistic images to describe the event:

He shouted louder and louder." Save me! I am hurt badly! I can be saved I can – save me before it's too late!" But the cries went no farther than his own ears. The icy wet concrete reached his chin. His heart appalled. " In a few seconds I will be entombed. If I can only breathe, they will reach me. Surely they will!" His face was quickly covered, its flesh yielding to the solid sharp-cut stones. "Air! Air!" screamed his lungs as he was completely sealed.(Di Donato 15)

The harshness and cruelty of the accident killing Geremio is described from his own viewpoint. Here he is the narrator of his own death. Benelli states that Di Donato had described the accident and Geremio's death in lurid, grisly detail. Geremio's mangled body, pierced through with metal reinforcement rods, is held up with arms outstretched for his crucifixion (Benelli). The position of Geremio's dying body is the same as Christ's was: stretched arms, pierced with metal. The symbolism with Christ is also in the fact that Geremio was aware of his imminent dying, as Christ was when he was about to be crucified. Geremio died as a victim of capitalism, of poor working conditions he could do nothing about. He was a victim of capitalistic bosses only seeking business opportunities and money instead of providing better and safer conditions to their employees.

Catholicism in America is also shaped by the needs of American society. In the following example by Avery, it is obvious that the traditional belief in God's humble servants, priests and nuns, suddenly changes for Paul and turns in the opposite direction. Avery suggests that "[...] the rotund parish priest, Father John, instead of offering aid, desires to resume his meal

of ‘baked potatoes, brown dripping lamb, fresh peas’ and ‘strawberry short cake.’ Feigning helplessness, the priest dismisses Paul with a piece of cake and hollow blessings” (30).

In America everything is seen as different by the newcomer, as suggested earlier in Boelhower’s model. Even religion has changed its meaning and subdued to capitalism. Di Donato capitalizes the word job as if it were a conscious entity. In one way he wishes to demonstrate how the opposites of God and Job quickly switch places. In the beginning of the novel Paul is a good Christian, however, as difficulties and tragedies occur, Paul gradually loses his faith in God, and soon replaces it completely with Job. Benelli adds that, as God begins to slip as something for Paul to believe in and trust, Job increases its own hold on his body and psyche. Then Paul recommences to work and support his family, and though this improves their condition, it never ceases to wear Paul down. Benelli argues that God is fleeting, but Job is real, immediate and tangible (Benelli).

The disappointments Paul had to endure in his life made him turn his back on God and focus completely on Job, which gave him enough money to provide for his loved ones. In his opinion, God has never shown up, has never helped him. On the other hand, Job is present here and now, the consequences of it are tangible. One might say that the wounds Paul has suffered are the evidence that the Job reveals its presence, while God hides himself and is numb to the sufferings Paul and his family have endured. In *Christ in Concrete* the priest does not respond to Paul’s needs as he is supposed to. Being interrupted while having a luxurious dinner, he simply ushers him out of the parish home with some bureaucratic phrases, leaving the poor boy still with many unanswered questions. This is also a novel of decline of humanity and religion.

Here not only Catholicism collapses and loses its original meaning, but also new orders take over. These are socialism and capitalism. Even in the example of Paul coming to

the parish home to ask help from the priest, the presence of capitalistic mentality is seen in the answers the priest gives to Paul's pleas:

Priest: "Well, why don't you speak?"

Paul began and spoke with burning weariness.

"Ah-yes, yes," said Father John. "But tell me, what can I do?"

"Has your mother applied at the Welfare?"

"They say my father wasn't a citizen."

[...] "Your mother is entitled to workmen's compensation."

[...] "But it will be a long time before the case comes."

"Father... [...] could you help us?"

"I have nothing to do with the Charities. There is a board of trustees who confer and pass on every expenditure. Do you understand?" ( Di Donato 57-58)

To a boy of mere twelve years of age the terms such as welfare, workmen's compensation, trustees and expenditure should be unfamiliar and unappealing. However, having taken over the role of his father and all of the obligations regarding the family, Paul seemed to understand every single word the priest has used as if they were part of Paul's everyday vocabulary. The impact socialism and capitalism had on the world of the time is present even in the domain of Catholicism. Before, in the Old Country, church and local priests were the ones to whom poor people could turn to and ask for help, without contacting boards, welfare, etc. Such committees did not even exist. After arriving to the States, these poor immigrants suddenly find themselves in a sea full of committees, funds, boards and other administrative bodies in charge of social cases. Thus even Church got involved in a bureaucratic hierarchy, where a simple priest cannot help his parish members anymore. He urges them to address certain boards, the instances created by capitalism.

To conclude, the protagonist Paul, second generation Italian American, although a mere boy manages to balance between religion and socialism the New World proposes to him. From the beginning of his American adventure, i.e. from the point he took over his father's job in construction, he represents the perfect example of how an individual should remain faithful to traditional Christian beliefs while still accepting new culture and new social and economical norms of socialism and Americanism. Out there, on the construction site, everybody can see that he underwent the process of acculturation and that he accepted American capitalism, whereas at home, in his private space, he is still able to worship and cherish the real Christian ideals stemming from his parents' homeland. In fact, his religiousness helps him survive in the cruel world of capitalism.



#### 4. Mario Puzo, *The Godfather* – Mafia: Tradition Meets Capitalism

In this chapter I shall introduce a complex and extended family structure and mobster hierarchy based on the examples from *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo. The crucial motifs in this novel are tradition and religion in connection with the mafia and its system of giving and returning favors. Another interesting motif I have found is the representation of female characters and the level of their emancipation in the context of the immigrant family and the mob.

A powerful Italian-American family, the Corleones, living in the United States and torn between tradition and capitalism, is another great example of how Italians and Italian Americans managed to survive on the American soil. Like other immigrant families, even this one started out as poor, but with time it rose and became one of the most powerful families not only on the East Coast, but in the entire USA. The 1969 novel *The Godfather* is written by Mario Puzo, an American writer of Italian descent. This is one of the most well-known mafia literary works, but its screen adaptation is far more famous. Divided in three sequels, *The Godfather I* (1972), *The Godfather II* (1974) and *The Godfather III* (1990) were directed by Francis Ford Coppola, featuring many Hollywood stars like Marlon Brando as Don Vito and Al Pacino as Michael Corleone. The screenplays were co-written by the Puzo himself. Puzo claims that he wrote a novel entirely based on research. After the huge success of the novel, and even greater success of the movies, some real-life gangsters admitted to Puzo that his novel was genuine and they did not believe it was completely fictive being quite similar to the real gangster lifestyle (Gussow). The central figure of the novel *The Godfather* is don Vito Corleone. He arrived in the States as a little boy and in a way he has fulfilled the American dream by becoming one of the most powerful and prominent gangsters in New York and on the entire East Coast. Abiding by the capitalist lifestyle, he had to enter some sort of business

to find his way to succeed in the United States. His business was based on olive oil import from Italy. One can argue that the Corleones' business differs greatly from the low-skilled and hard jobs in the other novels discussed here. As years go by, he gains a wide circle of friends based on the principle of favors. Being a respected man with connections in high political circles, community councils and similar bodies, the Don has made a lot of favors to a lot of people, expecting the same in return. He makes favors in a very smart way. He always knows what to ask for in return from each person he has helped. The novel begins with excellent examples of such favor making. There were many who turned to the Don in need of help, knowing he would do anything to help them, advising them what to do, providing them with contacts or doing something outside of the boundaries of the law.

The opening example is that of Amerigo Bonasera, who turns to Don Vito seeking vengeance. His daughter was attacked by two men who eventually ended up free of all charges, coming from rich families. Bonasera is certain that the Don would know what to do, or that he would find the way to set things straight and punish the men. In the end, the Don sends his men to beat up the two violators and thus does a favor to Amerigo. This system of giving and returning favors works along with another system, and that is *omertà*, i.e. the law of silence, where everything is done in privacy, and no order could be traced to the top of the chain, the Don. This is why there existed a strong hierarchy not only in the Corleone family, but in every other mafia family in the States. The hierarchy has its origin from southern Italian mobster families, operating in regions where Puzo and his lead character Vito Corleone come from. The system of trust and *omertà* is operative on all the levels in the hierarchy chain. The top link is the boss, i.e. the Don. He is the omnipotent godlike figure who commands directly or indirectly all the other links. His right hand is the *consigliere* or adviser, the closest and most intimate partner of the Don. He receives the commands directly from the Don and gives commands to other subordinate links in the chain. Each link would have to become a traitor in

order for the Don to be involved, but it never happened. Those who seemed treacherous or acted in a suspicious way had to be eliminated (Puzo 42-43).

Moreover, as the novel is set in a time span from 1945 to 1955, it shows the changes in the gangster business. As it was said earlier, the Corleones had an olive oil business, but it was only a cover-up for money laundering, gambling and other frauds. As the use of drugs begun to bring a lot of money to dealers, drug business became a huge source of income. The main adversaries for the Corleones were the Tattaglias, who took up the drug business. Vito was offered the same business as well, but the Don hesitated and eventually refused the offer, thinking that narcotics were a dirty business, too risky for his other interests (Puzo 64). Upon refusing, he soon gets shot by his opponents and ends up in hospital, fighting for his life. Don Vito's oldest son Santino, called Sonny, initially wanted to engage in the drug business and got into contact with their rivals, but the Don's word was final. This interest Sonny had shown for narcotics gave off an impression that the Corleone family did not have a unanimous opinion about drugs business. This made them vulnerable in the eyes of the rivals and the mob war started. James T. Chiampi explains how exactly the Corleones ended up in the dirty business. According to him, the situation forced them to translate Sicilian customs to American lifestyle, creating along the way their own system of justice:

If justice in this America is only for the rich or the native-born, then it acts as a principle of exclusion; nevertheless, this very situation creates an underworld that then works in marvelous harmony with business. Puzo shows that crime is a response to alienation and powerlessness, but more important, he shows how crime creates its own hierarchy and system of justice. The Godfather expounds the proposition that to avoid control by others one must create a Sicilian fiefdom and translate Sicilian customs into an American counterpart language. (23)

The response to being alienated and feeling powerless made the Italian family seek security in crime. Crime provides them with an income and gives them security that they would not end up at the bottom of society. Joining some gangster groups was a matter of survival for Italian families who needed protection and money. The groups have had a very good organization and hierarchical system, nurturing some Old World and very traditional ideas as loyalty, justice and struggle. Starting a life in America, Italians had to lead their lives American style. Becoming members of a mafia clan, they regained a sense of belonging so that they could combine both worlds. Mafia families are the perfect response to an issue of a traditional Italian *paesano* who resists being devoured by the American capitalism. Deep down, even after many years spent in America, many Italian Americans remained paesanos because of the remnants of the Old World within them. Although they had to transfer their entire lives from rural areas of Italy to the capitalist USA, the tradition remained rooted in their mentality. The relocation caused a whole series of changes and shifts. However, some things could not be shifted and changed. Here I refer to the gender issues regarding the position of women in an entirely patriarchal society. The family as a nucleus primarily is lead by the elders, the father and the mother. In the case of *The Godfather*, it is lead by the father, while the mother, as well as other female characters, is put in the background and is dealt with specific respect reserved for family members.

In this novel, the complexity of the family hierarchy and relationships they cherish clearly amount to a much more complex plot with many characters. The crucial thing is the mafia clans hierarchy which cherishes the traditional systems of value regarding the family and loyalty. Traditional beliefs and religion are a huge part of their lives, regardless of their dirty businesses. In all the three analyzed novels, religion is the linking factor. However, in *The Godfather* religion seems a background activity the characters respect as a remnant of the Old World, something to be revered, but not so important as the mafia legacy. Thomas Ferraro

describes the mafia family as “a sanctification of the family, a transposition of the sacred values and hierarchical logic of the church into the sphere of what religious historian Robert Orsi calls the domus, the father standing in, as it were, for God” (512).

The father, i.e. the godfather is the central figure, a figure that keeps the clan together. Don Vito Corleone is a pure Italian and he strongly believes in tradition, while his children, as a second generation Italians in America, are more Americanized and differ in some way from their father. Although belonging to the Corleone clan, the second generation does not always do what the head of the family wants them to. Even though the head of the family, the Don is not able to control them all the time so they tend to make wrong decisions without asking him for advice first. The Corleones of the second generation show instances of insubordination and, subsequently, manifest the fact of their assimilation. For example, Santino gets into trouble because of his womanizing nature; the middle son, Fredo, is the most loyal, but lacks the fierceness to run the family as Vito’s heir; Michael joins the army, goes to war and upon returning, starts a relationship with an American girl Kay Adams, instead of choosing one of the Italian American girls.

As mentioned above, female characters actually have supporting roles in the family. Their freedom is largely limited and there is little chance that they would ever, in the course of the novel, become emancipated. It seems rather important to differentiate how the system of the mentioned traditional values functioned in the case of female family members. First of all, women have gradually become central figures in mobster families as they grow older. As young girls, their role was quite unimportant. Marrying and becoming mothers, their household and family roles grew and they were given bigger importance. In *The Godfather* the women who were married with children were described as traditional Italian wives, while the single ones were described in a sexually explicit manner as easy women. As Chiampì proposes, the sensuality of Corleone women is constrained. Puzo is rather puritan in this

matter. Women are related to the idea of motherhood and men are the ones heading the family. The male figure who died because of his weakness for women is Santino, so called Sonny Corleone, the oldest of the Corleone's sons. Here Chiampi explains Sonny's fragility in relation to women:

As we have noted, in the world of *The Godfather*, as in the Counter- Reformation world of the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, trust, spontaneity, openness, and sexuality are resolutely proscribed. This puritan tinge fatally limits the role of women in the novel.[...] Sensuality and cunning are two hateful contraries which the novel simply cannot reconcile. Thus, the first promise of Sonny's fate is made in the opening chapter of the novel when Sonny makes love to Lucy Mancini, a bridesmaid at his sister's wedding. Connie, Sonny's sister, will become the unwitting agent of his death when she is deliberately beaten by her husband in order to provoke Sonny to rush to her defense in a blood rage. (27-28)

Because of his weakness for women, Sonny is the weakest link in the family. Although he is the chief womanizer in the novel, that doesn't make him a firm and strong character. On the contrary, his conquering skills make him fragile. He does not give women importance in business issues; however, to make him relieve the stress accumulated during the day, he usually runs into women's arms in search of protection and comfort. This female figure is sometimes Lucy Mancini, his free-time amusement, and sometimes it is his mother Carmela, representing a pillar of the family, along with his father Vito.

Mrs Corleone is a maternal figure who always comforts and advises her children, especially their daughter Connie. They both represent sacred things for all of the Corleone men. Connie Corleone, a female figure who inadvertently caused Sonny's death, is described by Puzo as a girl desirable only for her family name and background. Her father does not approve her choice of a husband, because her future spouse marries her for money and power

he is supposed to gain joining the Corleone clan. Eventually Don Vito agrees to their wedding, not knowing that his future son-in-law would cause his oldest son Sonny's death.

An outside female figure, Michael's girlfriend and later on wife Kay Adams, as Ferraro mentions in his essay, an alien to the Corleone family, is quite unaware of the Corleone influence and illegal activities on the East Coast. Throughout the novel she is represented as an outsider, even when she joins the family as Michael's wife. In the end, Michael takes over his father's position as the head of the Corleone family, and Kay still feels shocked when she witnesses her husband's criminal deeds (512-13). She is a good example of restrained female representation in the novel because her relation with Michael represents the dominion of paternal system over the maternal one, as explained by Ferraro:

Of course from a commonsense cynicism, the presence of women praying is awfully convenient for murderous men-another instance of the women, who are supposed to bear male children, boil the spaghetti, and otherwise keep quiet, apparently servicing their men-but to rest on that point is to underestimate, in the glow of nostalgia for paternalism, the extent of the male megalomania and the forms of resistance it faces. (516)

Kay, joining the Corleone family, a traditionally Catholic one, embraces Catholicism and renounces Protestantism. Michael in a way feels that being a Protestant may be a better way if one wishes to be more American, but Kay still switches to Catholicism to be accepted into the family. In her wish to blend into an immigrant family, she becomes a religious fanatic in a way, going to church on a daily basis. First being a true American, WASP girl and then transforming into a traditional Italian American wife, she accepts all the features the traditional Italian wives have: taking care of the household, obeying men and raising children. Her figure, as well as her mother- and sister-in-law's, is a tragic one. They, being completely subordinate to their husbands, can never become free and emancipated, although they are respected as maternal characters.

In the end, the key motifs discussed here were the remnants of Italian tradition in the New World and the ways a traditional mobster family manages to live in a capitalist world by adopting some of its principles but also clinging to its traditions. Furthermore, given their complex family and mobster hierarchy, it was important to explain the position of both men and women, the latter being completely family- and house-bound, while the men were the heads of the family, making decisions and being the sole providers.



## 5. Francine Prose, *Household Saints* –Embracing Americanism

The third novel to be discussed is a novel *Household Saints* by an American author Francine Prose. The author writes about Italian American immigrants from the 1950s to the 1990s. The novel deals with the issues of generation gap, religious crises and human relations. The question of religion is one of the pillars of the novel and one of the key motifs to be elaborated. Given that the author is not an ethnic Italian, it is interesting to observe how a non-Italian person manages to write a novel about an Italian community and its life among Americans. Prose successfully blends the old and the new, with a lot of comic instances and details. Given that the question of women's emancipation has already been introduced in the preceding chapter on *The Godfather*, it will now become more salient in the analysis. In my analysis I shall try to depict the level of female acculturation based on their position in society.

As mentioned above, religion is quite an issue in this novel. It is represented as a remnant of the Old World through the character of Mrs. Santangelo. The protagonist of the novel, on the other hand, is Catherine, a young woman married to Mrs. Santangelo's son Joseph. She is a second generation Italian in America and she finds the religiousness of Mrs. Santangelo tedious and old-fashioned. Mrs. Santangelo's religion consists to a large extent of superstitious beliefs, which Catherine thinks are funny and childish. Becoming her daughter-in-law, Catherine feels that she is inappropriate for her mother-in-law because she does not share her religious enthusiasm and her beliefs. From the day she becomes a member of the Santangelos, Catherine experiences nothing but hatred from the God-loving mother-in-law.

“A virtuous wife is more precious than rubies.’ Then he says, ‘But the most precious ruby of all is the blood.’ I ask you: Would you understand, man talks like that?”

Catherine shook her head.

“Blood?” I say. “What blood?”

“The blood of a virgin on her wedding night,” he says. [...]

“And tonight,” says Zio, “there are no rubies in the Santangelo home.” [...]

“How about it? Was there blood on my Joseph’s sheets?”

“I didn’t look.”

“Then I’ll go look.” [...]

...Mrs. Santangelo had stripped off the blanket to reveal a wrinkled bottom sheet, some dust specks, a few dark hairs and a number of yellowish stains.

“Disgrace,” hissed Mrs. Santangelo. “Infamy.” (Prose 79)

Being a deeply superstitious woman, Mrs. Santangelo predicts bad things shall happen to those who act according to their own lights. However, only when the lady’s prediction about Catherine losing her baby comes true, Catherine starts acting the way her mother-in-law thinks is best. Although this is partially a humoristic novel, dealing with issues like faith and religion a bit comically, some important questions have been exposed here. I would say that the main focus in this novel is put on female figures of Mrs. Santangelo, Catherine and Theresa, Catherine’s daughter. The main issues in the text are the position of women in the post-World-War II era and their ability to push through the masculine-oriented society, as well as the women’s tendency to seek comfort in religion. The title of the novel speaks a lot about the questions it deals with. *Household Saints* represents a sort of Holy Trinity in one Italian American family-- three generations of women with deeply rooted beliefs about religion and Christianity. First generation is represented through the character of Mrs. Santangelo, originally from Italy, narrow-minded and with quite strong and traditional

religious beliefs. The way her son Joseph has chosen his wife is quite inadequate and inappropriate for her. In fact, he has won his wife Catherine in a card game which he played with her father. Nevertheless, the old lady has no option but to accept the girl into the family. The girl, Catherine, as an outsider does not feel very welcome into the family, especially due to her mother-in-law's behavior. To be precise, Mrs. Santangelo drives the girl crazy with her superstitious and extreme religious beliefs. Catherine, as a representative of the second generation, is a down-to-earth girl, raised in Americanized surroundings, or as Donna Gabaccia would say, a middle-class immigrant woman that has been both a conserver of ethnic identity and a cultural innovator (Gabaccia, qtd. in Schultz 305). Her chief preoccupations are TV shows, music and celebrities. Coming to such tradition-oriented family, Catherine gradually adapts to it and abandons the mundane, shallow things like magazines, but she at least mentally remains the same modern girl she used to be. Getting closer to her husband Joseph and getting pregnant, Catherine is under constant observation by her mother-in-law. The old lady always watches every move the girl makes and comments on it in a 'if you do this, your baby will die/become ill' kind of way. When Catherine suddenly loses her baby, her mother-in-law's threats and premonitions seem to have come true. The young couple grieves over their loss, and Mrs. Santangelo blames Catherine for not obeying the religious rules imposed on her upon her arrival into the family. After a while, Catherine gets pregnant once again. This time she carries the pregnancy to term and gives birth to a girl named Theresa. This girl represents the third generation of the family. In the meantime, Mrs. Santangelo dies, and Theresa seems to embrace all of the old lady's beliefs. Moreover, she experiences religion in a far more elevated manner, wishing she could become like St. Theresa, her patron saint.

The question of religion has already been discussed in this essay, especially religiousness in *Christ in Concrete*. However, the religiousness in *Household Saints* is better

compared with the one in *Anna Marinkovich*. In both novels, women are the carriers of religion and tradition. Given that both novels have characters representing more than one generation, it is clear the differences in religiousness for both the first and the second generation of women exist. One other factor influences the changes, and it is the time the novels take place. In *Anna Marinkovich* as a pre-World-War-II novel, the maternal character is the representative of the first generation. The first generation is the one traditionally taking care of the family's religious education and manners. In *Household Saints*, a post-World-War-II novel, second generation takes over the main role, a role of assimilation and blending into American society. The second generation Italian Americans are trying to let go of the Old World's beliefs, the same as the second generation in *Anna Marinkovich*.

Another important detail is to be discussed. It is the question of female position in the society regarding the pre-war and post-war era. As Donna Gabaccia states, women's experiences on "the other side" (that is, at the margins of global capitalism from which most immigrants came) fell into two patterns: subsistence agriculture (Chinese, Italian, Scandinavian) and the spread of female wage-earning (Irish, Russian, Jewish, Japanese) (Gabaccia, qtd. in Schultz 304). It is doubtless that the American new world order shaped the gender issue by putting women into certain categories based on the job they perform. On the examples from *Anna Marinkovich* and *Christ in Concrete* it is evident that Italian and Croatian women from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century stuck to their household roles, while the following generations began working some physically less demanding jobs while still managing the household and expenses. In the table below, I have analyzed how, through time, the questions of religion and feminine emancipation seem to follow each other. Therefore, it seems as if religion gave up its place to socialist and economic ideas such as labor and money.

Question/novel	<i>Christ in Concrete</i>	<i>Anna Marinkovich</i>	<i>Household Saints</i>	<i>The Godfather</i>
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Period	1920s	1930s	1950s – 1980s	1950s-1980s
Religion	Strong beliefs and respect for religion	Quite strong beliefs in 1 <sup>st</sup> generation; 2 <sup>nd</sup> generation – loses religion	Strong beliefs in 1 <sup>st</sup> generation; 2 <sup>nd</sup> generation – no respect for religion; 3 <sup>rd</sup> generation – rediscovers religion	Strong beliefs in 1 <sup>st</sup> generation; quite strong beliefs in 2 <sup>nd</sup> generation
Feminine role	Housewives, taking care of the household	Housewives, taking care of the household	Working women, taking care of the household	Housewives, taking care of the household
Masculine role	Working men	Working men	Working men	Working men

It is rather obvious that World War II has brought a change in women's position regarding the household obligations. Women began to work and provide for their families along with their men. One can argue that their primary role as the carriers of religious beliefs changed with their new obligations at home and on the job.

The question of emancipation is to be elaborated. On the examples of four novels mentioned in this essay, it is evident that only in *Household Saints* can one talk about the emancipation of women. The other three novels are the representations of women as housewives and maternal figures, while in *Household Saints* their wish to become accepted as equal to men in the United States society leads to the complete abandoning of Old World beliefs and to their assimilation and acculturation in the modern society of the United States of America. The key figure of female emancipation is Catherine, an American woman torn between tradition (represented through the character of her mother-in-law) and the contemporary and modern ways. She listens to American music, watches American movies and wears American-style clothes. She despises all the Old World beliefs because the ones she encounters are mainly plain superstitions. After delivering her second baby, Theresa, Catherine thinks that modern science helped her deliver a healthy baby, rather than old country saints, referring to late Mrs. Santangelo's beliefs (Prose 170). However, as Theresa

grows, Catherine rediscovers the Old World religion given that her baby girl becomes a religious fanatic. Theresa starts attending Sunday mass with the neighbors, given that Catherine and Joseph have not been to church since Theresa's baptism (174). On this example it is evident that religion loses its meaning in the second generation, but the third one rediscovers it and accepts it enthusiastically. Theresa did not accept religion because she wanted to revive her Italian roots, but rather to become more and more like her patron saint, St. Theresa. Moreover, I would argue that her character is not truly representative of the third generation undergoing the process of rediscovery of the Old World. Theresa only partially rediscovered her family's roots and traditional beliefs, while other social and cultural elements are reserved for and cherished by the first generation Italian Americans.

In conclusion, there is quite a difference in the perception of religion between the generations. The first generation wishes to keep the traditional beliefs from the Old World, the second one wants to get assimilated into the American society, and the third wishes to return to the Old World beliefs. Alongside the changes in personal beliefs, this novel is a great example of how women in the Italian American communities changed mentally and have become more independent regarding their relationships with men. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their position was subordinate to men. Later on, after World War II and social revolutions in the 1960s, women became detached from their families in a way that they could get a job they wanted and follow certain social trends they were not allowed to follow before: fashion, choice in music, choice of lifestyle, etc.

## 6. Conclusion

In this essay some important issues concerning Italian American community in the USA have been examined on the examples from several novels. In the first place, it was necessary to examine the situation from an Italian American point of view, and this is why the novels *Christ in Concrete* and *The Godfather*, written by Italian American authors, have been analyzed. Furthermore, I considered it important to analyze the Italian American communities from an American standpoint. This is why the novel *Household Saints* has been chosen, given that its author is an American writer Francine Prose. Each novel has interesting motifs and themes regarding the problems of Italians in the USA from the 1920s up to the post-World-War-II era.

As far as Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* is concerned, it is a pre-war novel dealing with issues like the exploitation of immigrants, poverty, religion and tradition as consolation. The themes of physically demanding immigrant jobs and the concept of not too realistic expectations of the New World are the issues which dominate this section, as well as the interaction with other minority groups. In many examples this novel is similar to *Anna Marinkovich*, a Croatian-American novel by Edward Ifkovic, and therefore I have occasionally compared the two novels dealing with approximately the same period.

On the other hand, Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* seems so different from the other novels. However, I consider it generally to be dealing with the same topics, or at least the same problem – how to succeed in a harsh American reality. Although here the family is not at all economically challenged as in *Anna Marinkovich* or in *Christ in Concrete*, basically the problems are the same: survival and/or assimilation. The topics that are of importance here are tradition and family as a sort of fixed unity, fighting as one against the capitalist world and what Boelhower designates in his model as New World Reality. In the novel it is interesting

to observe the relationships between men and women, especially regarding female household and male public roles in the spheres of household and labor, respectively.

The last novel analyzed was *Household Saints* by Francine Prose. Due to being less popular and widely read than the other two, there were scarcely any sources to refer to. However, by comparing the novel with the other two, I was able to draw some conclusions, especially regarding the generation gap the family Santangelo deals with, and the position of women in a post-war period. The novel shows that immigrant women have moved up during their process of emancipation. Their position changed and now they could speak up, start working and take care of the family as good as the men have done it before them, but everything at the cost of getting assimilated.

To conclude, this essay deals with Italian American communities from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards. The special emphasis has been put on the oppositions between the Old World and the New World and all the questions arising from the clash of the two, concerning poverty, economic opportunity, religion and women's position in a largely man-dominated period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



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## Abstract

In this essay the cultural issues of Italian American communities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century USA have been examined on the examples from three novels: *Christ in Concrete* by Pietro Di Donato, *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo and *Household Saints* by Francine Prose. The cultural issues elaborated here were dealing with problems of assimilation, acculturation and other social and economic questions. The mentioned issues were studied on Italian – American literary works, but sometimes there were also comparisons to Croatian-American and Lithuanian-American literature, based on the novels *Anna Marinkovich* by Edward Ifkovic and *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair. First, the essay offers a definition of an immigrant novel based on the examples from William Boelhower's *The Brave New World of Immigrant Autobiography* and *The Immigrant Novel as a Genre*. Special emphasis was put on the opposition between the Old World and the New World, i.e. the opposition between tradition and modern world. In regards to the Old World, the essay discusses how Italian immigrants made peace with the new and modern, combining the elements of both worlds into a unique Italian American community. Given that the essay deals with the period of the twentieth century, it was important to mention the position of women and their progressive role from the Thirties to the Eighties. The feminine role developed from being solely housewives to becoming confident, independent and working women. Some historic events like world wars have changed the viewpoint and have made women become emancipated by getting jobs and expanding their role from a completely maternal one to a role of woman being capable of not only working but also taking care of the household.

**Key words:** immigration, assimilation, acculturation, immigrant novel, expectation, reality, tradition, modern, religion, socialism, capitalism, mafia, loyalty, cruelty, female emancipation, generation gap.